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ABSTRACT

The promotion of sexual stereotypes that portray girls as passive, dependent, and nurturing appears to have resulted in the socialization of females into roles that run counter to the function of creative imagination; women have been socialized not to write. A college course for students majoring in creative writing is helping women students to explore the ways their socialization as women has affected their writing. In the first stage, students explore the past. Women of the past--as has been illuminated by Virginia Woolf--were in fact prevented from writing. Even when they did write, anthologists and writers of literary history (who in the past have always been men) have not given their works the attention they merit and have regarded only a limited range of subjects as appropriate for women's writing. Women students should learn to understand the differences in women's and men's writing that arise from differences in the way they have been socialized, and they should try to find their own voices. They can learn to create new literary themes (such as woman as hero) to defy socialized limitations in their writing, and to explore dimensions of themselves as women writing. (GW)

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Women and Writing: A New Course for the Creative Writing Curriculum

We are learning day by day how central sex role stereotyping and dichotomizing and hierachizing have been in the socialization of human lives. Just last week, I came across a children's book, copyright 1949, that had been read to me many times as a child. I am not naive; yet I found myself still taken aback. On the cover, under the title "We Like to Do Things": a small boy forging a head on a scooter; hanging onto his waist, in order to keep herself from falling off, a little girl, her pink hair ribbons streaming in the wind. Inside the book: illustrations of small boys playing, constructing, eating; accompanying captions: we [the boys] like to do things, glue things, chew things. More sets of small boys building, fooling dogs and little girls, and having fun at football: we like to make things, tricks things, kick things. Of small girls (and I will let you imagine the accompanying illustrations): we like to sew things, grow things, blow things; we like to patch things, latch things, hatch things. The sexual stereotypes emerge, as we have learned to expect them: boys are active and assertive -- doing things, making things; girls are passive, dependent, and nurturing -- sewing things (doll's clothes and a man's sock appear in the picture), hatching things.

No matter how much we value the role of the woman as it is presented in such sexual stereotypes (I, for one, am glad to have been taught to grow things

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rather than to trick things and to patch things rather than to kick things, though I want an end to sexual dichotomizing), nonetheless we must consider the woman's socialized sex role in relationship to the act of writing. Adrienne Rich says in her essay "When We Dead Awaken":

> For a poem to coalesce, for a character or an action to take shape there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive.... (If) the imagination is to transcend and transform experience, it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives... nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or to call experimentally by another name. For writing is re-naming. But to be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way, is in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination.[1]

Women writers have certainly been tricked if the traditional roles into which women have been socialized run counter to the function of imagination. The implications of such an insight are far-reaching: that women have been socialized not to write. This basic perception led me to conceive a new course for our creative-writing-major curriculum at the University of Pittsburgh, a course which is now thriving. Through it, my students and I have discovered the various ways our socialization as women has affected our writing and, gaining awareness, have worked toward finding our voices as writing women.

First, we explore the past; writers, like other folks, need to find their ancestors. We need a heritage, a tradition; we want to know where we came from so that we can respect our "roots." What do women find as literary heritage? For one thing, they find that their literary ancestors, those women of the past, were not given leave to write. Perhaps the most concrete description of this state of affairs is found in Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own:

> Let me imagine, since facts are so hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say. Shakespeare himself went, very probably -- his mother was an heiress -- to the grammar school,

where he may have learnt Latin -- Ovid, Virgil and Horace -- and the elements of grammar and logic. He was, it is well known, a wild boy who poached rabbits, perhaps shot a deer, and had, rather sooner than he should have done, to marry a woman in the neighbourhood, who bore him a child rather quicker than was right. That escapade sent him to seek his fortune in London. He had, it seemed, a taste for the theatre; he began by holding horses at the stage door. Very soon he got work in the theatre, became a successful actor, and lived at the hub of the universe, meeting everybody, knowing everybody, practising his art on the boards, exercising his wits in the streets, and even getting access to the palace of the queen. Meanwhile his extraordinarily gifted sister, let us suppose, remained at home. She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil. She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother's perhaps, and read a few pages. But then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers. They would have spoken sharply but kindly, for they were substantial people who knew the conditions of life for a woman and loved their daughter -- indeed, more likely than not she was the apple of her father's eye. Perhaps she scribbled some pages in an apple loft on the sly, but was careful to hide them or set fire to them. Soon, however, before she was out of her teens, she was to be bethrothed to the son of a neighbouring wool-stapler. She cried out that marriage was hateful to her, and for that she was severely beaten by her father. Then he ceased to scold her. He begged her instead not to hurt him, not to shame him in this matter of her marriage. He would give her a chain of beads or a fine petticoat, he said; and there were tears in his eyes. How could she disobey him? How could she break his heart? The force of her own gift alone drove her to it. She made up a small parcel of her belongings, let herself down by a rope one summer's night and took the road to London. She was not seventeen. The birds that sang in the hedge were not more musical than she was. She had the quickest fancy, a gift like her brother's, for the tune of words. Like him, she had a taste for the theatre. She stood at the stage door; she wanted to act, she said. Men laughed in her face. The manager -- a fat, loose-lipped man -- guffawed...no woman, he said, could possibly be an actress. He hinted -- you can imagine what. She could get no training in her craft. Could she even seek her dinner in a tavern or roam the streets at midnight? Yet her genius was for fiction and lusted to feed abundantly upon the lives of men and women and the study of their ways. At last -- for she was very young, oddly like Shakespeare the poet in her face, with the same grey eyes and rounded brows -- at last Nick Greene the actor-manager took pity on her; she found herself with child by that gentleman and so -- who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body? --

> killed herself one winter's night and lies buried at some cross-roads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle.
>
> That, more or less, is how the story would run, I think, if a woman in Shakespeare's day had had Shakespeare's genius.[2]

Woolf goes on to say that it is difficult enough for any human being, under almost any circumstances, to produce a work of art; but for a woman of the past, without a room of her own, dependent for pin money on the good will of her father, often caught up later in the duties of wife and mother, and through all this not told by the world merely "Write if you choose; it makes no difference to me"; but always told: "Write? What's the good of your writing?" -- for a woman, under such circumstances, to produce a work of art is a miracle.[3] No wonder that some of what those who did try finally wrote was not very good. They were either angry or bitter or else had internalized a need to be docile and submissive. It's hard to create a genuinely artistic product when you are consumed by anger or forced into a role that is not authentic to you.

But there have always been strong women. And we know that some -- miraculously -- did break through the oppression of the past and did write. These are our literary ancestors. What has happened to them? Illuminating is a passage from Louise Bernikow's introduction to <u>The World Split Open</u>:

> A conversation based on experience, full of imaginative truth. I am talking with a venerable professor of English literature, famous for the scope of his learning and powerful in the liberalism of his concerns. I ask, "What do you know about women poets?"
>
> He: "Women don't make good poets."
>
> I: "Why not?"
>
> He: "Because women are good at accumulation of detail . . ."
>
> He is holding his arms in front of his body, forming a circle with them. He has shaped a pregnant belly.
>
> ". . . and not at the sharp, thrusting . . ."
>
> He is making sharp, thrusting motions with one of his arms.
>
> ". . . sensibility that is required for good poetry."
>
> This is the sort of person who has written literary history.[4]

What then, has happened to the women who did manage to write in the past? Let us take one example. Because of their roles as observers, wives, mothers, women have developed a keen eye for detail, especially detail involving interpersonal relationships. For this reason, and because they were a little limited in the kind of experience that produces, say, War and Peace, many women wrote journals and diaries dealing with the exploration of feelings. Men were not kind to these forms, finding the expression of feeling overly-emotional. Yet, diaries now appearing in books like Charlotte Painter's and Mary Jane Moffat's Revelations: Diaries of Women show that the self-expression often did get heightened, did get dramatized. Why, then, have we not read most of these diaries before? The answer is given by Bernikow when she asks: "Whose history is literary history?" and responds:

> What is commonly called literary history is actually a record of choices. Which writers have survived their time and which have not depends upon who noticed them and chose to record the notice. Which works have become part of the "canon" of literature, read, thought about, discussed, and which have disappeared depends, in the same way, on the process of selection and the power to select along the way. Such power, in England and America, has always belonged to white men. That class has written the record called literary history, which is clearly shaped by the attitudes, conscious or unconscious, of white men toward nonwhites and nonmales. As a result of the process whereby male power makes male culture and thereby male taste, the literary history or, when included, has been distorted by the values of the class that has transmitted it.[5]

work of women has either been excluded from

Bernikow substantiates these arguments well. Poets, she feels, have been affected by this class action masquerading as literary history more than novelists have. The reason: novels, which live in and are about the social order, thus includes men more often than not; and women who write about men are more likely to be acknowledged, whatever they are saying, than women who do not. Poets, writing out voices of the inner self, reporting on private experience, may more often leave men out and thus have sometimes been

easy to do away with. Examples of how women's work has been distorted are presented by Bernikow in abundance:

Everyone knows Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "How do I love thee" (which speaks in the emotive voice of a white, heterosexual, married woman); but how many are familiar with her tirades against American racism or her feminist verse novel Aurora Leigh?

William Michael Rossetti, editing Christina Rossetti's works, left quite a few poems out; judging from the titles of the omitted material, to which we do have access, these are love poems to women.

Aphra Behn was publicly denounced as a whore because her plays and poems were explicitly sexual.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's work was rejected by Thackeray for publication in his magazine because he found it "unladylike."

The most frequently anthologized poems of Edna Millay, whom Bernikow calls "poetry's Marilyn Monroe," suggest her as the sexually available "new woman" of the twenties; but the seriousness of her work and the politics of her thinking ~~is~~ are almost always overlooked.

The examples heap up. For subject matter women have been allowed love, the expression of adoration, longing, and dependence in relation to a male figure, and religion, which focuses on the men who are God the Father and God the Son; the religious experience, too, is a receiving experience and therefore suitably feminine. But women have not been encouraged to write about other dimensions of their lives because these other dimensions either bore men or, in some instances, as when women write about the embarrassing subject of their bodies, frighten men. To talk of lesbian love, to chant anarchy, chaos, or revolution, to move into the area of political consciousness,

especially feminism, reminds Bernikow, is to move out of place.

I think women writing students should know these things about their literary history. We have a rich past. We must understand its oppression and our survival of its oppression so that we have the pride to move forward.

How shall we encourage our students to move -- in what direction? Once they come to understand the oppression of women writers in the past and to know that they can move from passivity to assertion and activity, and thus to the act of writing, what more can we teach them about the relationship between being a woman and being a writer? Adrienne Rich says:

> [Woman] meets the image of Woman in books written by men. She finds a terror and a dream, she finds a beautiful pale face, she finds La Belle Dame Sans Merci, she finds Juliet or Tess or Salome, but precisely what she does not find is that absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature, herself, who sits at a desk trying to put words together.
>
> ↑ no space
>
> ¶→So what does she do? What did I do? I read the older women poets with their peculiar keenness and ambivalence: Sappho, Christina Rossetti, Emily Dickinson, Elinor Wylie, Edna Millay, H.D. I discovered that the woman poet most admired at the time (by men) was Marianne Moore, who was maidenly, elegant, intellectual, discreet. But even in reading these women I was looking in them for the same things I had found in the poetry of men, because I wanted women poets to be the equals of men, and to be equal was still confused with sounding the same.[6]

I think we must let our women students find their own female voices. How can we sound the same when we have been socialized so differently? Often, women may indeed have a prose that moves more slowly than the active male voice, that's a little more dense in detail. And if it's quite reasonable, why not? Why not a bit more internal rather than external action? Our prose, our voice, has grown from our special realm of experience. How often do we

demand that our students write the rugged, snappy, quick prose that has been called "masculine"? Why? Readability comes in other measures. And we have a different audience now, too. We know that male writers have, in the past, always written for men, not for women. Now women can write for women and men, for ourselves, for humans. Women are learning to respect women as audience, respecting the subjects that interest us and the sound of our voices on the page.

None of this is to say that we ought to become slovenly critics as we learn to sort out genuine standards for what is artistic from just white male standards. I quote Rich yet again:

> I want to stress that writing poetry is really hard work — a real labor with language. No amount of inspiration is sufficient, no "feeling you have a lot to say" is sufficient. It's hard work involving immense self-criticism and self-discipline. It's not enough to have this churning consciousness, the exhilaration, the rage. They will carry you, but not far enough. To create a viable culture, we need serious commitment, a deeper knowledge of the past, a caring for language.[7]

One of the most exciting experiences for my women writing students has been the opportunity to create woman as hero. The past has offered us: ~~their~~ women seen through the eyes of male writers and in relation to men: their mothers, wives, lovers, sisters, daughters; the innumerable virgin goddesses, bitches, earth mothers. So often patriarchal distortions of who women are, or who patriarchy has socialized women to be. The Other. The present affords us: women writing of women in relation to each other; women writing from their new awareness of being in touch with their own feelings; women writing of women who do not, as Shaw warned we can, die into luxuries for men, writing of women who refuse to be victims; women creating new myths, new archetypal figures of themselves.

Many of my women students come to my course feeling anger and victimization because this society has socialized them to be passive and dependent; and passivity and dependence work against the function of imagination. When they find their literary ancestors, when they find approval for their own voices, the voices that have grown out of our shared experience as women, then they will write to defy socialized limitations and to explore dimensions of themselves as women writing — with pride and with excitement.

NOTES

[1]Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," College English, October, 1972, pp. 18-25.

[2]Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1957), pp. 48-50.

[3]Ibid., pp. 53-54.

[4]Louise Bernikow, "Introduction," in The World Split Open: Four Centuries of Women Poets in England and America, 1552 - 1950, ed. Louise Bernikow (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 3.

[5]Ibid., pp. 3-4.

[6]Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," College English, October, 1972, pp. 18-25.

[7]Adrienne Rich, "Adrienne Rich and Robin Morgan Talk About Poetry and Women's Culture," in The New Woman's Survival Sourcebook, ed. Kristen Grimstad and Susan Rennie (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975) p. 111.